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**"Brilliant and real
and true."**

—Rosanne Cash

An inspiring guide to creativity in the digital age, **STEAL LIKE AN ARTIST** presents ten transformative principles that will help readers discover their artistic side and build a more creative life.

Nothing is original, so embrace influence, school yourself through the work of others, remix and reimagine to discover your own path. Follow interests wherever they take you—what feels like a hobby may turn into your life's work. Forget the old cliché about writing what you know: Instead, write the book you want to read, make the movie you want to watch.

And finally, stay smart, stay out of debt, and risk being boring in the everyday world so that you have the space to be wild and daring in your imagination and your work.

STEAL LIKE AN ARTIST

10 THINGS NOBODY TOLD YOU ABOUT BEING CREATIVE

AUSTIN KLEON

WORKMAN PUBLISHING COMPANY • NEW YORK

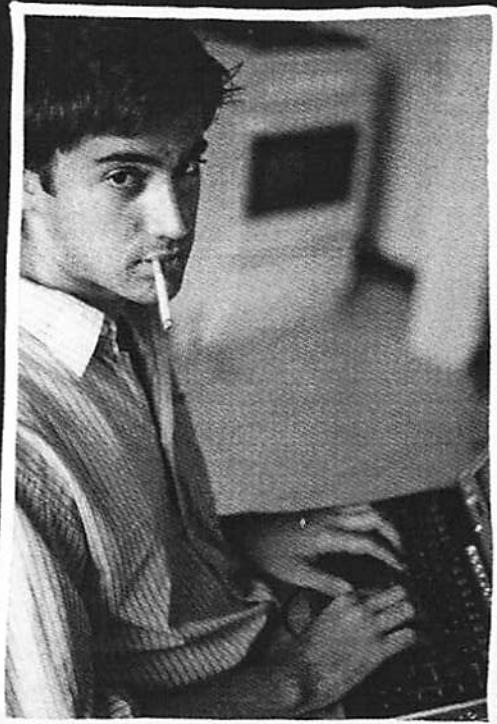
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"Art is theft."

—Pablo Picasso

**"Immature poets imitate;
mature poets steal; bad
poets deface what they take,
and good poets make it into
something better, or at least
something different. The
good poet welds his theft into
a whole of feeling which is
unique, utterly different from
that from which it was torn."**

—T. S. Eliot



19-YEAR-OLD ME
COULD USE SOME
ADVICE...

ALL ADVICE IS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.

It's one of my theories that when people give you advice, they're really just talking to themselves in the past.

This book is me talking to a previous version of myself.

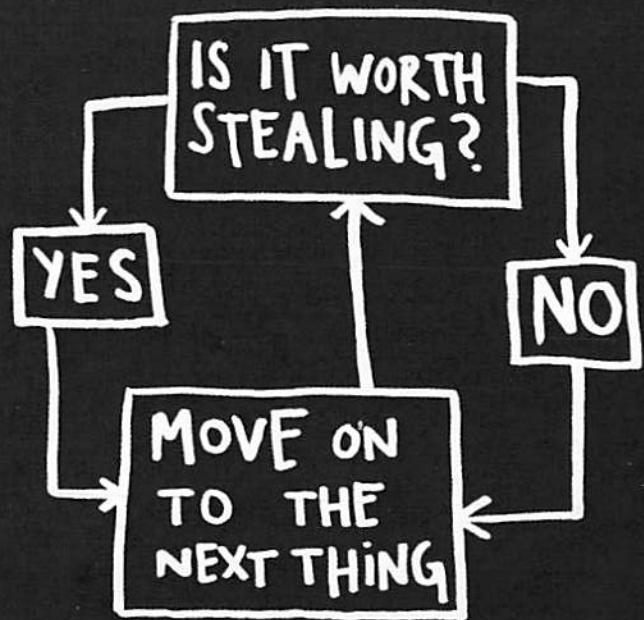
These are things I've learned over almost a decade of trying to figure out how to make art, but a funny thing happened when I started sharing them with others—I realized that they aren't just for artists. They're for everyone.

These ideas apply to anyone who's trying to inject some creativity into their life and their work. (That should describe all of us.)

In other words: This book is for you.
Whoever you are, whatever you make.

Let's get started.

① STEAL LIKE
AN ARTIST.



HOW TO LOOK AT THE WORLD (LIKE AN ARTIST)

Every artist gets asked the question,

"Where do you get your ideas?"

The honest artist answers,

"I steal them."

How does an artist look at the world?

First, you figure out what's worth stealing, then you move on to the next thing.

That's about all there is to it.

When you look at the world this way, you stop worrying about what's "good" and what's "bad"—there's only stuff worth stealing, and stuff that's not worth stealing.

Everything is up for grabs. If you don't find something worth stealing today, you might find it worth stealing tomorrow or a month or a year from now.

**"The only art I'll ever study is
stuff that I can steal from."**

—David Bowie

NOTHING IS ORIGINAL.

The writer Jonathan Lethem has said that when people call something "original," nine out of ten times they just don't know the references or the original sources involved.

What a good artist understands is that nothing comes from nowhere. All creative work builds on what came before. Nothing is completely original.

It's right there in the Bible: "There is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Some people find this idea depressing, but it fills me with hope. As the French writer André Gide put it, “Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But, since no one was listening, everything must be said again.”

If we’re free from the burden of trying to be completely original, we can stop trying to make something out of nothing, and we can embrace influence instead of running away from it.

**“What is originality?
Undetected plagiarism.”**

—William Ralph Inge

THE GENEALOGY of IDEAS

Every new idea is just a mashup or a remix of one or more previous ideas.

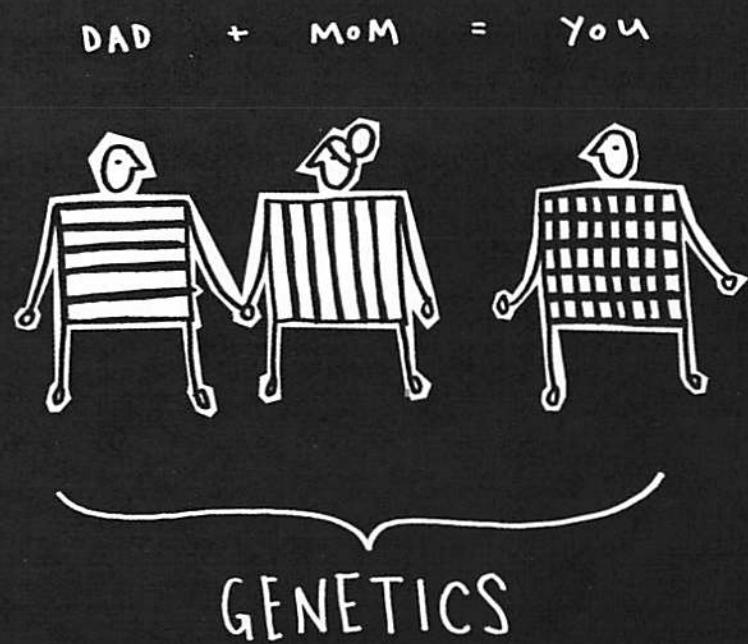
Here’s a trick they teach you in art school. Draw two parallel lines on a piece of paper:



How many lines are there?

There’s the first line, the second line, but then there’s a line of negative space that runs between them.

See it? $1 + 1 = 3$.



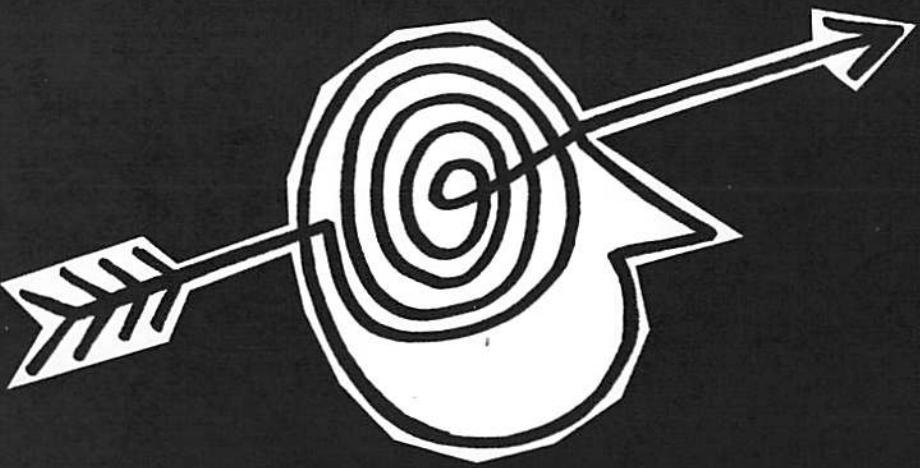
A good example is genetics. You have a mother and you have a father. You possess features from both of them, but the sum of you is bigger than their parts. You're a remix of your mom and dad and all of your ancestors.

Just as you have a familial genealogy, you also have a genealogy of ideas. You don't get to pick your family, but you can pick your teachers and you can pick your friends and you can pick the music you listen to and you can pick the books you read and you can pick the movies you see.

You are, in fact, a mashup of what you choose to let into your life. You are the sum of your influences. The German writer Goethe said, "We are shaped and fashioned by what we love."

"We were kids without fathers . . . so we found our fathers on wax and on the streets and in history. We got to pick and choose the ancestors who would inspire the world we were going to make for ourselves."

—Jay-Z



GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT.

The artist is a collector. Not a hoarder, mind you, there's a difference: Hoarders collect indiscriminately, artists collect selectively. They only collect things that they really love.

There's an economic theory out there that if you take the incomes of your five closest friends and average them, the resulting number will be pretty close to your own income.

I think the same thing is true of our idea incomes. You're only going to be as good as the stuff you surround yourself with. My mom used to say to me, "Garbage in, garbage out." It used to drive me nuts. But now I know what she meant.

Your job is to collect good ideas. The more good ideas you collect, the more you can choose from to be influenced by.

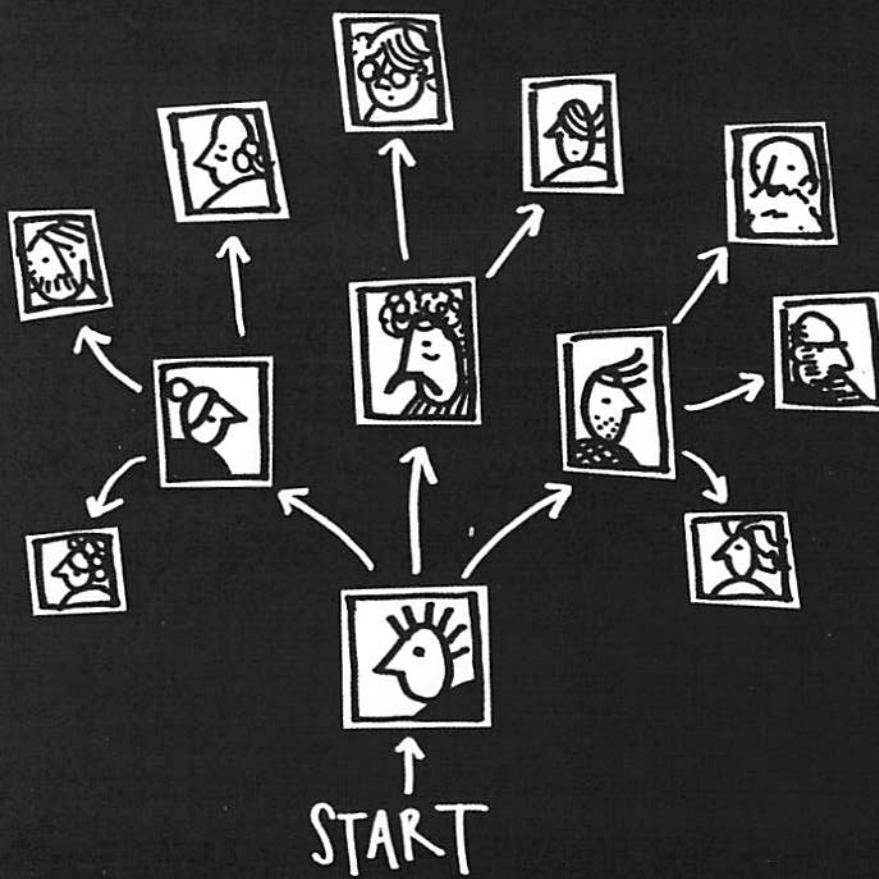
"Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic."

—Jim Jarmusch

CLIMB YOUR OWN FAMILY TREE.

Marcel Duchamp said, "I don't believe in art. I believe in artists." This is actually a pretty good method for studying—if you try to devour the history of your discipline all at once, you'll choke.

Instead, chew on one thinker—writer, artist, activist, role model—you really love. Study everything there is to know about that thinker. Then find three people that thinker loved, and find out everything about them. Repeat this as many times as you can. Climb up the tree as far as you can go. Once you build your tree, it's time to start your own branch.



Seeing yourself as part of a creative lineage will help you feel less alone as you start making your own stuff. I hang pictures of my favorite artists in my studio. They're like friendly ghosts. I can almost feel them pushing me forward as I'm hunched over my desk.

The great thing about dead or remote masters is that they can't refuse you as an apprentice. You can learn whatever you want from them. They left their lesson plans in their work.

most of the time, I
read deeply

and stay open. I
wouldn't have been
able to do that if I
hadn't been reading
books like *The Cat in the
Hat* and saving them. Mr. Rumpf
never minded. I'd go to his
library and he'd always let me

continue to wonder

Google it
y o

SCHOOL YOURSELF.

School is one thing. Education is another. The two don't always overlap. Whether you're in school or not, it's always your job to get yourself an education.

You have to be curious about the world in which you live. Look things up. Chase down every reference. Go deeper than anybody else—that's how you'll get ahead.

Google everything. I mean everything. Google your dreams, Google your problems. Don't ask a question before you Google it. You'll either find the answer or you'll come up with a better question.

"Whether I went to school or not, I would always study."

—RZA

Always be reading. Go to the library. There's magic in being surrounded by books. Get lost in the stacks. Read bibliographies. It's not the book you start with, it's the book that book leads you to.

Collect books, even if you don't plan on reading them right away. Nothing is more important than an unread library.

Don't worry about doing research. Just search.

SAVE YOUR
THEFTS FOR
LATER.

Carry a notebook and a pen with you wherever you go. Get used to pulling it out and jotting down your thoughts and observations. Copy your favorite passages out of books. Record overheard conversations. Doodle when you're on the phone.

Go to whatever lengths necessary to make sure you always have paper on you. Artist David Hockney had all the inside pockets of his suit jackets tailored to fit a sketchbook. The musician Arthur Russell liked to wear shirts with two front pockets so he could fill them with scraps of score sheets.

Keep a swipe file. It's just what it sounds like—a file to keep track of the stuff you've swiped from others. It can be digital or analog—it doesn't matter what form it takes, as long as it works. You can keep a scrapbook and cut and paste things into it, or you can just take pictures of things with your camera phone.

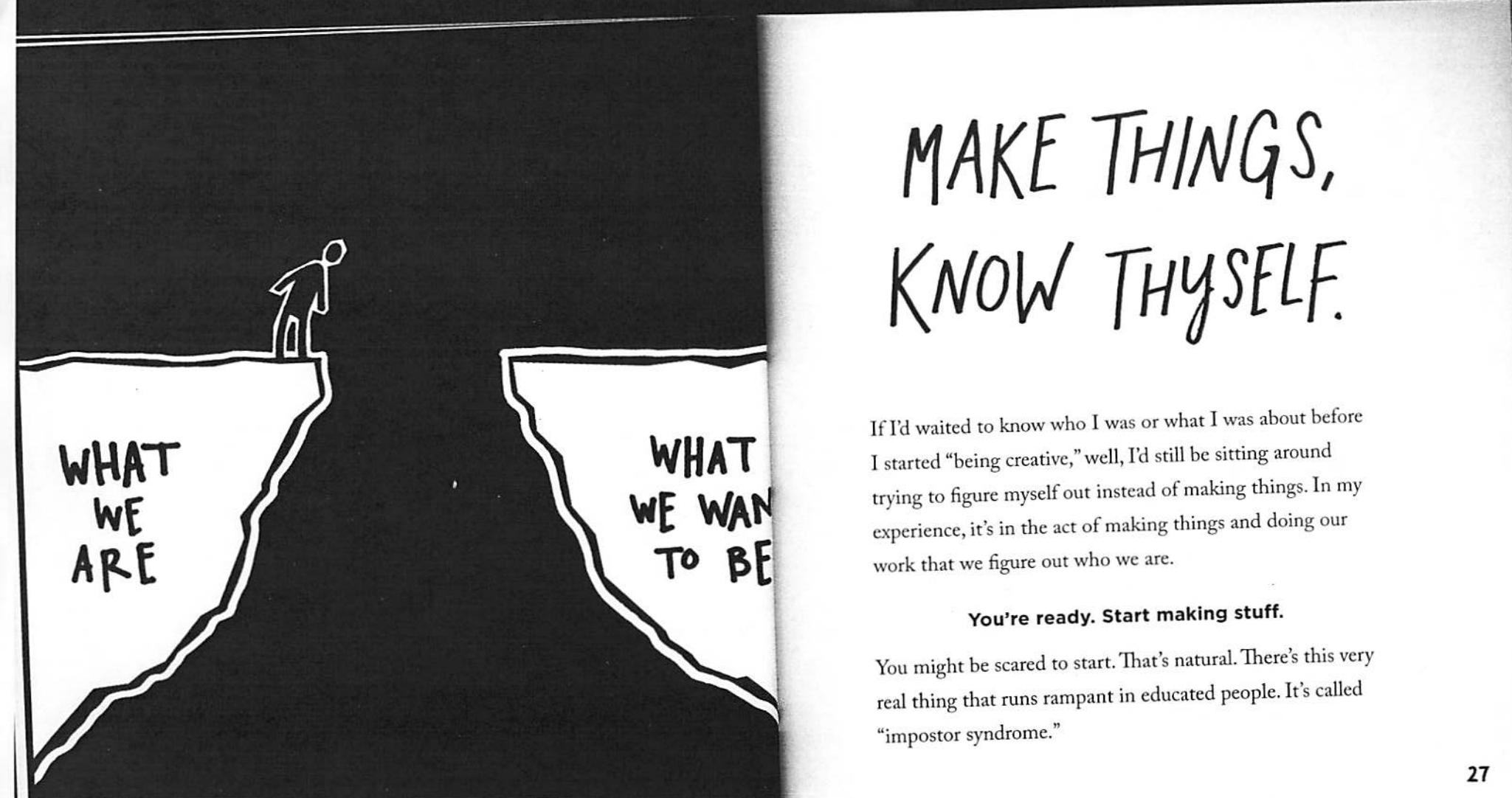
See something worth stealing? Put it in the swipe file. Need a little inspiration? Open up the swipe file.

Newspaper reporters call this a "morgue file"—I like that name even better. Your morgue file is where you keep the dead things that you'll later reanimate in your work.

"It is better to take what does not belong to you than to let it lie around neglected."

—Mark Twain

② DON'T WAIT UNTIL
YOU KNOW WHO YOU
ARE TO GET STARTED.



MAKE THINGS, KNOW THYSELF.

If I'd waited to know who I was or what I was about before I started "being creative," well, I'd still be sitting around trying to figure myself out instead of making things. In my experience, it's in the act of making things and doing our work that we figure out who we are.

You're ready. Start making stuff.

You might be scared to start. That's natural. There's this very real thing that runs rampant in educated people. It's called "impostor syndrome."

The clinical definition is a “psychological phenomenon in which people are unable to internalize their accomplishments.” It means that you feel like a phony, like you’re just winging it, that you really don’t have any idea what you’re doing.

Guess what: None of us do. Ask anybody doing truly creative work, and they’ll tell you the truth: They don’t know where the good stuff comes from. They just show up to do their thing. Every day.

**FAKE IT 'TIL
YOU MAKE IT.**

Have you ever heard of dramaturgy? It’s a fancy term for something William Shakespeare spelled out in his play *As You Like It* about 400 years ago:

**All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.**

Another way to say this? *Fake it 'til you make it.*

I love this phrase. There are two ways to read it:

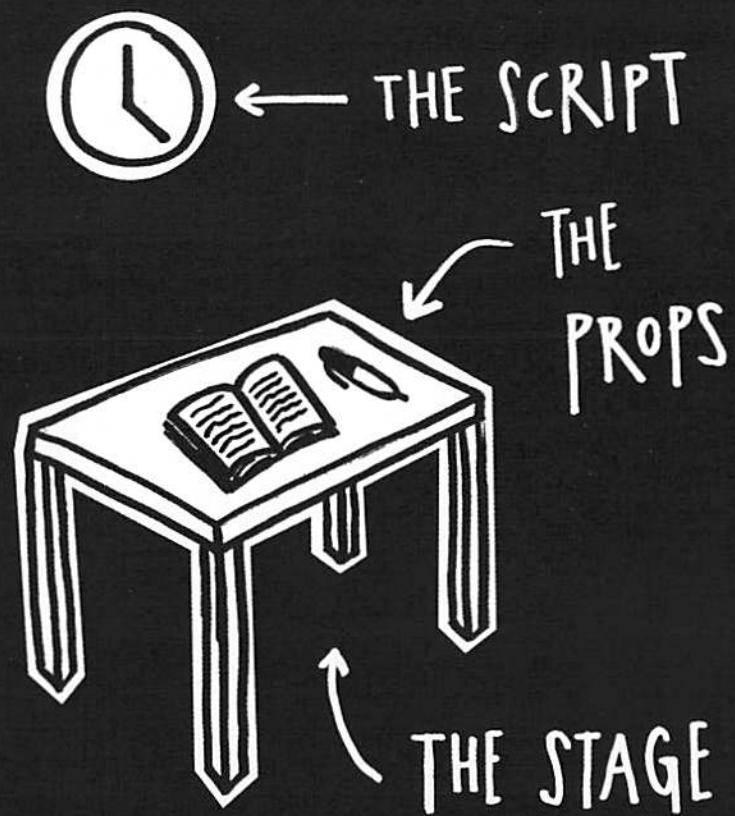
1. Pretend to be something you're not until you are—fake it until you're successful, until everybody sees you the way you want them to; or
2. Pretend to be making something until you actually make something.

I love both readings—you have to dress for the job you want, not the job you have, and you have to start doing the work you want to be doing.

I also love the book *Just Kids* by the musician Patti Smith. It's a story about how two friends who wanted to be artists moved to New York. You know how they learned to be artists?

"You start out as a phony and become real."

—Glenn O'Brien



They pretended to be artists. In my favorite scene, from which the book gets its title, Patti Smith and her friend, the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, dress up in all their bohemian gypsy gear and go to Washington Square Park, where everybody's hanging out. This old touristy couple is gawking at them. The wife says to her husband, "Oh, take their picture. I think they're artists." "Oh, go on," the husband disagrees. "They're just kids."

The point is: All the world's a stage. Creative work is a kind of theater. The stage is your studio, your desk, or your workstation. The costume is your outfit—your painting pants, your business suit, or that funny hat that helps you think. The props are your materials, your tools, and your medium. The script is just plain old time. An hour here, or an hour there—just time measured out for things to happen.

Fake it 'til you make it.

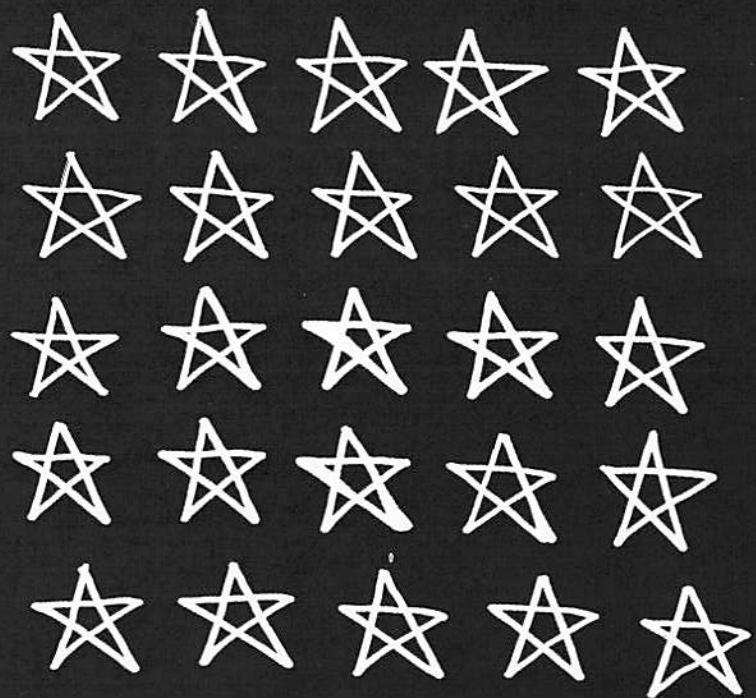
START COPYING.

Nobody is born with a style or a voice. We don't come out of the womb knowing who we are. In the beginning, we learn by pretending to be our heroes. We learn by copying.

We're talking about practice here, not plagiarism—plagiarism is trying to pass someone else's work off as your own. Copying is about reverse-engineering. It's like a mechanic taking apart a car to see how it works.

"Start copying what you love. Copy copy copy copy. At the end of the copy you will find your self."

—Yohji Yamamoto



THE HUMAN HAND IS INCAPABLE
of MAKING A PERFECT COPY.

We learn to write by copying down the alphabet. Musicians learn to play by practicing scales. Painters learn to paint by reproducing masterpieces.

Remember: Even The Beatles started as a cover band. Paul McCartney has said, "I emulated Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis. We all did." McCartney and his partner John Lennon became one of the greatest songwriting teams in history, but as McCartney recalls, they only started writing their own songs "as a way to avoid other bands being able to play our set." As Salvador Dalí said, "Those who do not want to imitate anything, produce nothing."

First, you have to figure out who to copy. Second, you have to figure out what to copy.

Who to copy is easy. You copy your heroes—the people you love, the people you're inspired by, the people you want to be. The songwriter Nick Lowe says, "You start out by rewriting your hero's catalog." And you don't just steal

from one of your heroes, you steal from all of them. The writer Wilson Mizner said if you copy from one author, it's plagiarism, but if you copy from many, it's research. I once heard the cartoonist Gary Panter say, "If you have one person you're influenced by, everyone will say you're the next whoever. But if you rip off a hundred people, everyone will say you're so original!"

What to copy is a little bit trickier. Don't just steal the style, steal the thinking behind the style. You don't want to look like your heroes, you want to see like your heroes.

The reason to copy your heroes and their style is so that you might somehow get a glimpse into their minds. That's what you really want—to internalize their way of looking at the world. If you just mimic the surface of somebody's work without understanding where they are coming from, your work will never be anything more than a knockoff.

IMITATION IS NOT FLATTERY.

"We want you to take from us. We want you, at first, to steal from us, because you can't steal. You will take what we give you and you will put it in your own voice and that's how you will find your voice. And that's how you begin. And then one day someone will steal from you."

—Francis Ford Coppola

At some point, you'll have to move from imitating your heroes to emulating them. Imitation is about copying. Emulation is when imitation goes one step further, breaking through into your own thing.

"There isn't a move that's a new move." The basketball star Kobe Bryant has admitted that all of his moves on the court were stolen from watching tapes of his heroes. But initially, when Bryant stole a lot of those moves, he realized he couldn't completely pull them off because he didn't have the same body type as the guys he was thieving from. He had to adapt the moves to make them his own.

Conan O'Brien has talked about how comedians try to emulate their heroes, fall short, and end up doing their own thing. Johnny Carson tried to be Jack Benny but ended up Johnny Carson. David Letterman tried to copy Johnny Carson but ended up David Letterman. And Conan O'Brien tried to be David Letterman but ended up Conan O'Brien. In O'Brien's words, "It is our failure to become

| GOOD THEFT VS. BAD THEFT | |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| HONOR | DEGRADE |
| STUDY | SKIM |
| STEAL FROM MANY | STEAL FROM ONE |
| CREDIT | PLAGIARIZE |
| TRANSFORM | IMITATE |
| REMIX | RIP OFF |

"I have stolen all of these moves from all these great players. I just try to do them proud, the guys who came before, because I learned so much from them. It's all in the name of the game. It's a lot bigger than me."

—Kobe Bryant

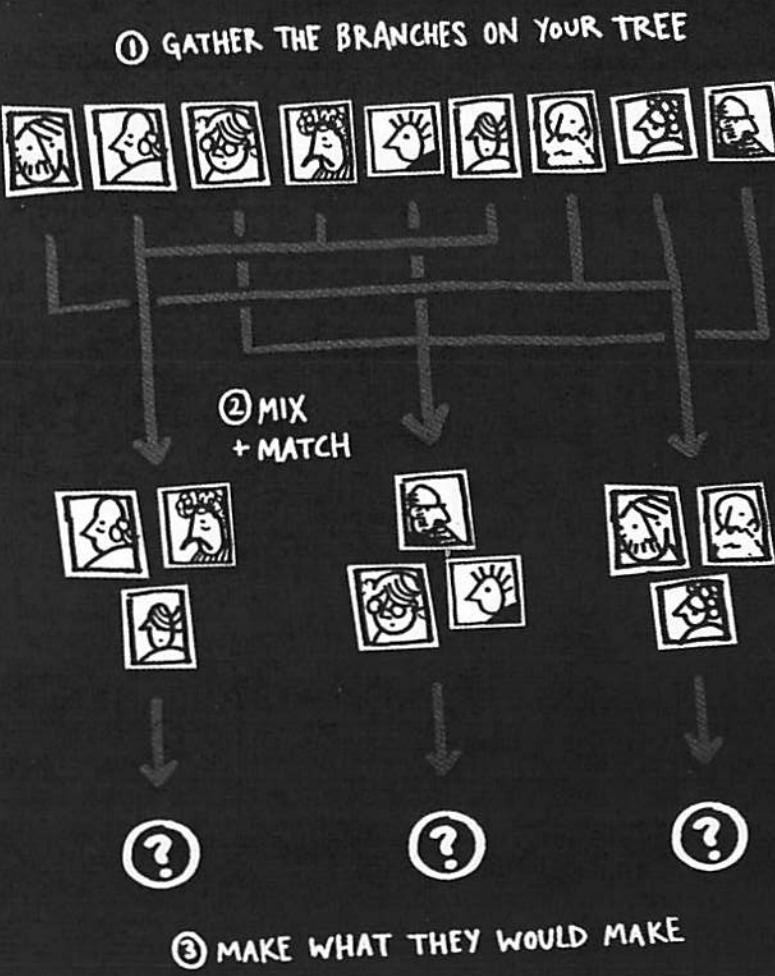
our perceived ideal that ultimately defines us and makes us unique."Thank goodness.

A wonderful flaw about human beings is that we're incapable of making perfect copies. Our failure to copy our heroes is where we discover where our own thing lives. That is how we evolve.

So: Copy your heroes. Examine where you fall short. What's in there that makes you different? That's what you should amplify and transform into your own work.

In the end, merely imitating your heroes is not flattering them. Transforming their work into something of your own is how you flatter them. Adding something to the world that only you can add.

③ WRITE THE BOOK
YOU WANT TO READ.



WRITE WHAT you ~~KNOW~~ LIKE.

The movie *Jurassic Park* came out on my tenth birthday. I loved it. The minute I left the theater, I was dying for a sequel, so I sat down the next day at our old PC and typed one out. In my treatment, the son of the game warden eaten by Velociraptors goes back to the island with the granddaughter of the guy who built the park. One of them wants to destroy the rest of the park, the other wants to save it. Of course, they fall in love and adventures ensue.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was writing what we now call fan fiction—fictional stories based on characters that already exist.

Ten-year-old me saved the story to the hard drive. A few years later, *Jurassic Park II* finally came out. And it sucked. The sequel always sucks compared to the sequel in our heads.

The question every young writer at some point asks is: “What should I write?” And the standard answer is, “Write what you know.” This advice always leads to terrible stories in which nothing interesting happens.

“My interest in making music has been to create something that does not exist that I would like to listen to. I wanted to hear music that had not yet happened, by putting together things that suggested a new thing which did not yet exist.”

—Brian Eno

We make art because we like art. We’re drawn to certain kinds of work because we’re inspired by people doing that work. All fiction, in fact, is fan fiction.

The best advice is not to write what you know, it’s to write what you like. Write the kind of story you like best—write the story you want to read. The same principle applies to your life and your career: Whenever you’re at a loss for what move to make next, just ask yourself, “What would make a better story?”

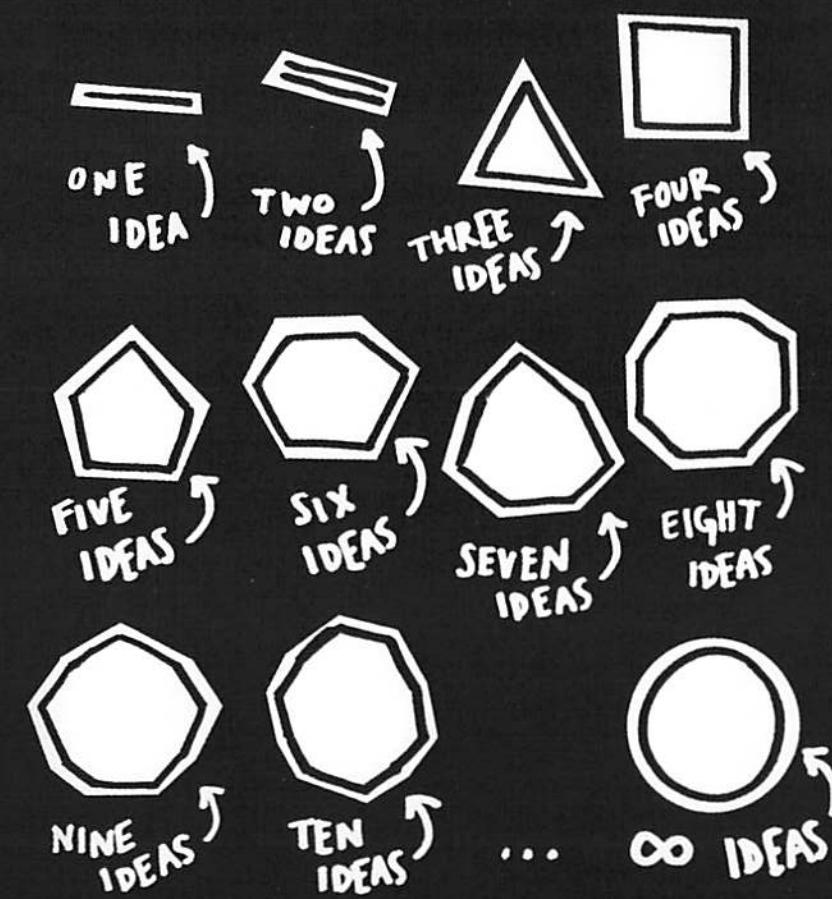
Bradford Cox, a member of the band Deerhunter, says that when he was a kid he didn’t have the Internet, so he had to wait until the official release day to hear his favorite band’s new album. He had a game he would play: He would sit down and record a “fake” version of what he wanted the new album to sound like. Then, when the album came out, he would compare the songs he’d written with the songs on the real album. And what do you know, many of these songs eventually became Deerhunter songs.

When we love a piece of work, we're desperate for more. We crave sequels. Why not channel that desire into something productive?

Think about your favorite work and your creative heroes. What did they miss? What didn't they make? What could've been made better? If they were still alive, what would they be making today? If all your favorite makers got together and collaborated, what would they make with you leading the crew?

Go make that stuff.

The manifesto is this: Draw the art you want to see, start the business you want to run, play the music you want to hear, write the books you want to read, build the products you want to use—do the work you want to see done.



④ USE YOUR
HANDS.

STEP AWAY FROM THE SCREEN.

"We don't know where we get our ideas from. What we do know is that we do not get them from our laptops."

—John Cleese

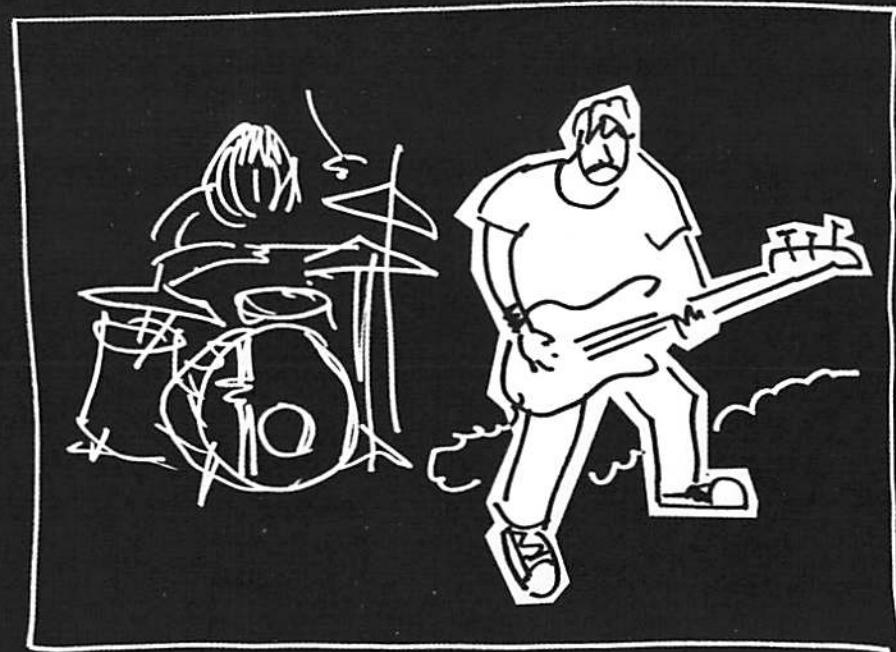
My favorite cartoonist, Lynda Barry, has this saying: "In the digital age, don't forget to use your digits!" Your hands are the original digital devices. Use them.

While I love my computer, I think computers have robbed us of the feeling that we're actually making things. Instead, we're just typing keys and clicking mouse buttons. This is why so-called knowledge work seems so abstract. The artist Stanley Donwood, who's made all the album artwork for the band Radiohead, says computers are alienating because they put a sheet of glass between you and whatever is happening. "You never really get to touch anything that you're doing unless you print it out," Donwood says.

Just watch someone at their computer. They're so still, so immobile. You don't need a scientific study (of which there are a few) to tell you that sitting in front of a computer all day is killing you, and killing your work. We need to move, to feel like we're making something with our bodies, not just our heads.

Work that only comes from the head isn't any good. Watch a great musician play a show. Watch a great leader give a speech. You'll see what I mean.

You need to find a way to bring your body into your work. Our nerves aren't a one-way street—our bodies can tell our brains as much as our brains tell our bodies. You know that phrase, "going through the motions"? That's what's so great about creative work: If we just start going through the motions, if we strum a guitar, or shuffle sticky notes around a conference table, or start kneading clay, the motion kickstarts our brain into thinking.



ART THAT ONLY COMES FROM THE HEAD
ISN'T ANY GOOD.

"I have stared long enough at the glowing flat rectangles of computer screens. Let us give more time for doing things in the real world . . . plant a plant, walk the dogs, read a real book, go to the opera."

—Edward Tufte

When I was in creative writing workshops in college, everything we did had to be double-spaced and in Times New Roman font. And my stuff was just terrible. Writing ceased to be any fun for me. The poet Kay Ryan says, "In the old days before creative writing programs, a workshop was a place, often a basement, where you sawed or hammered, drilled or planed something." The writer Brian Kiteley says he tries to make his workshops true to the original sense of the word: "a light, airy room full of tools and raw materials where most of the work is hands-on."

It wasn't until I started bringing analog tools back into my process that making things became fun again and my work started to improve. For my first book, *Newspaper Blackout*, I tried to make the process as hands-on as possible. Every poem in that book was made with a newspaper article and a permanent marker. The process engaged most of my senses: the feel of newsprint in my hands, the sight of words disappearing under my lines, the faint squeak of the marker

tip, the smell of the marker fumes—there was a kind of magic happening. When I was making the poems, it didn't feel like work. It felt like play.

The computer is really good for editing your ideas, and it's really good for getting your ideas ready for publishing out into the world, but it's not really good for generating ideas. There are too many opportunities to hit the delete key. The computer brings out the uptight perfectionist in us—we start editing ideas before we have them. The cartoonist Tom Gauld says he stays away from the computer until he's done most of the thinking for his strips, because once the computer is involved, "things are on an inevitable path to being finished. Whereas in my sketchbook the possibilities are endless."

When it came time to sequence *Newspaper Blackout*, I scanned all the pieces into a computer and printed them out on little quarter sheets of paper. Then I pushed the sheets of paper all over my office, rearranging them into piles, and then a stack, the order of which I copied back

DIGITAL



(MY OFFICE)

ANALOG

onto the computer. That's how the book was made—hands first, then computer, then hands, then computer. A kind of analog-to-digital loop.

That's how I try to do all my work now. I have two desks in my office—one is “analog” and one is “digital.” The analog desk has nothing but markers, pens, pencils, paper, index cards, and newspaper. Nothing electronic is allowed on that desk. This is where most of my work is born, and all over the desk are physical traces, scraps, and residue from my process. (Unlike a hard drive, paper doesn't crash.) The digital desk has my laptop, my monitor, my scanner, and my drawing tablet. This is where I edit and publish my work.

Try it: If you have the space, set up two workstations, one analog and one digital. For your analog station, keep out anything electronic. Take \$10, go to the school supply aisle of your local store, and pick up some paper, pens, and sticky notes. When you get back to your analog station, pretend it's craft time. Scribble on paper, cut it up, and tape the

pieces back together. Stand up while you're working. Pin things on the walls and look for patterns. Spread things around your space and sort through them.

Once you start getting your ideas, then you can move over to your digital station and use the computer to help you execute and publish them. When you start to lose steam, head back to the analog station and play.

⑩ CREATIVITY
IS SUBTRACTION.



Olympics. Sure, it could be biased, but at least it was explicable bias.

Creativity is

subtraction.

Tara
ral for-
ved on.

ould
ined
his idiosyncrasies to warm our hearts. Remember the costume he described as "a Care Bear on

more. I
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CHOOSE WHAT TO LEAVE OUT.

In this age of information abundance and overload, those who get ahead will be the folks who figure out what to leave out, so they can concentrate on what's really important to them. Nothing is more paralyzing than the idea of limitless possibilities. The idea that you can do anything is absolutely terrifying.

The way to get over creative block is to simply place some constraints on yourself. It seems contradictory, but when it comes to creative work, limitations mean freedom. Write a song on your lunch break. Paint a painting with only one

color. Start a business without any start-up capital. Shoot a movie with your iPhone and a few of your friends. Build a machine out of spare parts. Don't make excuses for not working—make things with the time, space, and materials you have, right now.

The right constraints can lead to your very best work. My favorite example? Dr. Seuss wrote *The Cat in the Hat* with only 236 different words, so his editor bet him he couldn't write a book with only 50 different words. Dr. Seuss came back and won the bet with *Green Eggs and Ham*, one of the bestselling children's books of all time.

"Telling yourself you have all the time in the world, all the money in the world, all the colors in the palette, anything you want—that just kills creativity."

-Jack White

There are definite dangers in thinking you can do everything.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

do with less

whittle down the
stream
so
you can think

...co. Babel,
S. S. C. Captain, the
set of
S. S. S., S. S.
start
now

The artist Saul Steinberg said, "What we respond to in any work of art is the artist's struggle against his or her limitations." It's often what an artist chooses to leave out that makes the art interesting. What isn't shown versus what is. It's the same for people: What makes us interesting isn't just what we've experienced, but also what we haven't experienced. The same is true when you do your work: You must embrace your limitations and keep moving.

In the end, creativity isn't just the things we choose to put in, it's the things we choose to leave out.

Choose wisely.

And have fun.



WHAT NOW?



- TAKE A WALK
- START YOUR SWIPE FILE
- GO TO THE LIBRARY
- BUY A NOTEBOOK AND USE IT
- GET YOURSELF A CALENDAR
- START YOUR LOGBOOK
- GIVE A COPY OF THIS BOOK AWAY
- START A BLOG
- TAKE A NAP

RECOMMENDED READING



- LYnda Barry, WHAT IT IS
- HUGH MACLEOD, IGNORE EVERYBODY
- JASON FRIED + DAVID HEINEMEIER HANSSON, REWORK
- LEWIS HYDE, THE GIFT
- JONATHAN LETHEM, THE ECSTASY OF INFLUENCE
- DAVID SHIELDS, REALITY HUNGER
- SCOTT MCLOUD, UNDERSTANDING COMICS
- ANNE LAMOTT, BIRD BY BIRD
- MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, FLOW
- ED EMBERLEY, MAKE A WORLD

Y.M.M.V.

(YOUR MILEAGE MAY VARY!)



SOME ADVICE CAN BE A VICE.

FEEL FREE TO TAKE WHAT YOU CAN USE,
AND LEAVE THE REST.

THERE ARE NO RULES.

TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK
OR SAY HELLO AT:

www.austinkleon.com